

From: stepheni@linc.cis.upenn.edu@inetgw
To: Microsoft ATR
Date: 1/28/02 8:34am
Subject: Microsoft Settlement

Dear Sirs,

I am an academic computer user of some years' experience. I avoid Microsoft software as much as possible. On occasions when I have used it, I have found it to be unreliable, insecure and prone to viruses. Most of the people I speak to who do use it feel that it is imposed upon them, that they have no real choice, and have submitted with a "you can't fight city hall" attitude. This letter is a small attempt at fighting city hall.

In my view the two worst aspects of the Microsoft Corporation's behavior are its bullying tactics and its deliberate subversion of standards such as email and web-page formats. These are difficult practices to legislate specifically against, but they are made possible by the sheer size and power of Microsoft, which is why the original idea breaking up the corporation was a good one. Smaller, competing companies could not commit such abuses as successfully.

Although it is difficult to frame rules to outlaw bullying as such, there are several specific instances of it that could be prevented, but are not, in the proposed settlement. One is forcing manufacturers to include a Microsoft operating system with their computers, whether or not the customer wants one. Another is forbidding the use of free software in conjunction with various program components. Both of these are outrageous impositions on the customer, made possible only by Microsoft's monopoly position.

In fact the only time I run a Microsoft operating system these days is to do my income taxes. I don't know for certain why no one produces a tax program for, say, Linux, or some other Unix-like operating system. It would be simple enough to do. The tax programs are simple combinations of well-established spreadsheet and browser technologies, and don't depend on the operating system to any serious extent. It would be quick and cheap to port the tax programs I have used to Linux, and the Linux market, while not comparable in size to the Microsoft one, must be large enough to be profitable for such a small extra outlay of effort. My guess, however, is that the potential profit is not big enough to offset the threat of retaliation by Microsoft. They are big enough that all they need to do is hint at retaliation.

Another general tendency that cannot be prevented outright, but could be better curbed than it is in the proposed settlement, is acting as if Microsoft owned the user's computer. Their software has always made unannounced edits to system files and replaced system components at will. Now they are putting in license provisions that have the effect of requiring the user to get their permission to upgrade his/her own hardware. Surely it must be possible to force them to give the buyer of software the right to use it as he/she sees fit, within the general framework of the law.

Although these are not the only shortcomings of the proposed settlement, they are the ones that seem most vital to me. I'm sure that others will write to you focussing on different ones.

Yours respectfully,

Stephen Isard